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Haim Hazan, *Against Hybridity: Social Impasses in a Globalizing World*  
 Polity Press: Cambridge 2015, £15.99, paperback  
 178 pp, 978 0 7456 9070 4

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## QUIDDITY AND FLUX

In a descriptive sense, the sprawling idea of hybridity can be taken to refer to the perpetual mixing and morphing, borrowing and mimicking, synthesizing and syncretizing, boundary-breaching and identity-stretching that goes on whenever particular social forces, cultural forms, and contentious discourses engage and then re-settle in compromised and creative fashion. Put that way, hybridity is a kind of constant of human interaction and group formation, a meta-datum of what happens through countless crossover processes occurring at many different levels and across the ages. And as the way the world is, so to speak, it is hard to see how we could be either 'for' or 'against' hybridity.

However, Israeli gerontologist, anthropologist and sociologist Haim Hazan seeks to jolt us into greater concern, by adding two further layers of attention. Hybridity, under conditions of capitalist globalization, is not just human business as usual, but interactions, identities and proclivities that become relentlessly mediatized and commodified, as an effect of which our human sensibilities are blurred and numbed. Nodding thus in the direction of the Frankfurt School, and drawing on Marwan Kraidy's *Hybridity* (2005), the subtitle of which casts it as the cultural logic of globalization, Hazan plays up the burgeoning number of fads, services, and imaginings that fuel both the unfettered market drive and a slightly bizarre collective desire for anything apparently blended, fused and glocal. Like Kraidy too, but more emphatically, Hazan views today's cultural analysts and critics as themselves constituting, culpably, a central part of the malaise. In a series of broad associations binding together the state of consumerist, touristic popular culture and what he takes to be a recently achieved, but thoroughgoing, consensus

in how we theorize postmodern networking, multicultural, cosmopolitan society, Hazan indicts social and cultural studies for establishing hybridity as the contemporary 'master trope' of understanding and normativity. Hybridity, he believes, has become the obligatory, yet complacent, structure of feeling, to the point where we cannot easily tell whether the social trends apprehended within its omnivorous terms are the source or the output of the organizing mind-set. Either way, we should know better.

Pitched like that, *Against Hybridity* echoes polemics from the 1990s charging that cultural studies had become entranced by the consumer populism it was supposed to be skewering. There are also some reiterations of warnings issued by philosophical realists regarding the promiscuous relativism and unseriousness of postmodernist thinking. Hybridity, after all, is very close to the metaphorical 'de-differentiation' that in those earlier rounds played the role of unravelling the sharp modernist demarcations of distinct spheres of society, thought and affect, thereby turning a series of vertically nested institutions, tastes and analytical procedures into flattened, amorphous planes of apperception.

The primary thrust of Hazan's enterprise lies not in his return to those well-worn sceptical tracks, nor in his re-telling of the 'genealogical' storyline in terms of which, in the early and middle phases of Western modernity, any dealings with hybridity (migrants, gypsies, slaves, mestizos, subalterns) were pursued by Western elites through the toxic contrapositions characteristic of their racist essentialism—fear and desire, hatred and envy, paternalism and punishment. Of course, social hybridization persisted just as a matter of fact, but the moral markers around it were unmistakable and forbidding. The extent to which this has all changed in late modernity is a matter of controversy—as illustrated by the ongoing advances and impasses in postcolonial studies—though the current global migrant crisis bolsters a definite sense of continuity.

In a series of bold assertions, Hazan sets out his own stall. Today, he announces, 'no leeway is left for the emergence of uncultivated fiends'. The 'previously feared, hence marginalized hybrid, the perpetrator of moral panic and disorder, has moved to the legitimate core of social interaction'. Hybridity 'started with racial theory, and then turned against colonialism, finally becoming a pillar of global popular culture'—'hybridity-as-taboo' has become 'hybridity-as-celebrity'. Moreover, social anthropology and cultural studies are party to this reversal, because under the all-but-unchallengeable 'interpretive paradigm' of our times, they centre on 'the anthropomorphizing and humanizing of everything through hybridization and assimilation'. The relentless trumpeting of the vital power of the in-between has dramatically changed our 'conceptions of who we are, what we know, and how we live in the world'. For Hazan, the principal

defect of this reigning imperative, alongside its complicity with commercial globalization, is its failure to recognize the existence, and take seriously the opaque interiors, of *non-hybrid* spaces and subjectivities. Indeed these instances of 'cultural sturdiness', he claims, are in large part the product of a new exclusionary binary propagated by fashionable cultural critique itself, such that 'the infinite new tolerance for hybridization' is 'accompanied by zero tolerance for non-hybridity'.

Hazan then offers his own selection of non-hybrid spheres and experiences, veritable islands of 'indestructible quiddity' in the postmodern flux, each underlining how (at best) merely ostensible and (at worst) actively harmful are 'politically correct' gestures towards uniform inclusiveness. In fact, non-hybrid conditions and groups are stubborn buffers against easy-going politics and research. They resist full assimilation into mainstream solutions and standard categorization. They block the impulse to constantly, seamlessly translate everyone's values and lives into the same right-on currency. The examples he works with in order to demonstrate this are the 'unadulterated evil' of the Holocaust and the utter particularity of its victims' feelings and situations; the experience of sheer physical pain; autism; and extreme old age, not least when Alzheimer's is part of that condition. This last exemplar dominates the discussion, ethnographic work on citizens of the (not so long-ago) 'Third Age' being the author's long-standing scholarly concentration. Indeed, bringing old age and elderly infirmity from the margins to the centre of cultural theory is the very striking secondary ambition of *Against Hybridity*, perhaps parallel in its way—the speculation is mine—to Robin Blackburn's *Banking on Death* (2002), which has altered the coordinates of our understanding of the twenty-first-century economy.

That order of comparison fails, however, because Hazan's argumentation lacks cumulative detail and coherence. Certainly, both the negative-critical and positive parts of his campaign are salutary. Hybridity is an intrinsically loose notion, covering a vast number of phenomena and relationships, and neither its homogeneous application nor its progressive character can be taken for granted. And there is something politically and morally stifling about the ways in which the thematics and practices of affirmative diversity, in the liberal academy and in metropolitan circles alike, are wielded to reconfigure the lists of who in society is to be favouritized, who shunned or scorned. In that context, Hazan deserves credit for going against the grain. However, he tends to set up equations and draw conclusions that are insecure. Zeal in the pursuit of diversity does not in itself necessarily amount to hybridity-fixation. Nor does overdone 'correctness' automatically invalidate the general drift of the deconstructions it might accompany. And even if the politics of hybridity is prominent in the register of specialist thought,

this does not mean that it has a stranglehold on power and ideas in the world at large. But Hazan assumes that it does, making this large claim stick, ironically, only through a 'monstrous' depiction of the agent of egregious mixedness—globalization, capitalism, consumerism, cultural theory, postmodernism, carnivalesque tourism, the mass media, information society, multiculturalism, political correctness, the 'anthropological machine' all in one.

Hazan's account of non-hybridity, likewise, has its pros and cons. It makes us think hard about what is non-assimilable to any presumed template of the meaning and value of experience, and about the recondite ways in which these subcultures determinedly hold their own. Wisely, Hazan is pointing here to the agonistic character of any genuine striving to come to terms with deep difference: we want everything to make integrated sense according to our own perceptions and norms, but must not frog-march other people on to our subjective terrain. This entails mixed feelings and complicated politics, but we need to learn to deal with that. On the other hand, if it is true that hybridity-supporters habitually alight only upon morally 'good' instances, screening out 'incorrect' or 'difficult' cases that complicate the picture, and thus the ethics, then this charge applies also to Hazan's illumination of non-hybridity. As a matter of social observation, the frail, the ill, the old and Holocaust victims share that category—arguably—with executioners, rapists, alcoholics, abusers, the brutalized and the bigoted. At this point, we may wonder whether the dualistic hybrid/non-hybrid nomenclature is adequate to its object, sociologically speaking, for unless we are to conclude that the culturally sturdy are fundamentally, deservedly on their own, we need interpretive and practical strategies of *mediation*, to situate hybridity and non-hybridity along a range rather than in terms of a stark polarity. Yet this appears to be anathema to Hazan, as the very vehicle through which this era's excluded barbarians and savages are trapped and tamed, colonized and patronized by the confident, privileged brokers of mutable selfhood. Autistic people of course talk of being 'on the spectrum', but that is considered acceptable, because it is their way of staking out the clear bounds of their community politics. Spectrumming in general, however, is to be roundly condemned.

This intransigence on Hazan's part is puzzling, on two major counts. The first is that it seems to defy a kind of logistical law of human comprehension. No matter what the particular merits or deficits of the content of a given scheme of interpretation, all attempts at systematic analysis deal more or less subtly in constructing, between boundary definers at each end, a series of intermediate, interacting points or attributes. The contrasts between the points on the scale remain distinct as a matter of categorical specification, and a strict antithesis is required to hold at the poles, but in

whatever sphere of reality the theories are designed to explain, actual cases will be likely to carry elements of more than one of the projected qualities. Name any academic or popular way of sifting lived processes into component variations and intensities, and something like this style of understanding will be at work (though some may demand the qualification, 'in Western, modern thinking').

Undoubtedly, difficult dilemmas can arise from this encompassing effort. Hazan is particularly intent on holding the enormity of the Holocaust beyond all comparison and dilution. But without sober contextualization and general causal reasoning by degrees, nothing whatever can be said by way of explanation of such elemental horror. Even those who are occupationally suspicious of the rationalistic capture of radically singular episodes resort to their own version of generalized explanation when they encapsulate the Holocaust as the ghoulish logical consequence of modernity's passion for order. Michael Mann's *The Dark Side of Democracy* (2005) has a defter take, explicating murderous ethnic cleansing, of which the Holocaust is the direst expression, in terms of the path-dependent perversion of otherwise quotidian motivations (career structures, self-interest, compliance with group ideology, the deadening of routine, the thrill of partaking of the extreme). Normal death itself, which Hazan suggests secular society has reduced to a physical full stop, is in fact partitioned and stretched in many ways: think of medical and technological prolongation, drug regimes, assisted suicide, organ harvesting, missing bodies, treasured objects, communing with the spirits, failures to 'draw a line' under it all, reiterated personal ceremonies of remembrance. Hazan's other cases are similarly intended to show that spectrums are the means by which ideological hybridity-mongers tame the new barbarians and savages that agitate and resist them, bent on their 'social death' as upright, though cryptic, realities. But as with autism or dementia, the reworking of notionally distinct health conditions into a broader spectrum or spread of features, strengths and connections seems only to be what the course of (fallible) investigation warrants.

The second reason Hazan's assault on inter-mediation is problematical is that the banner title of the book turns out to be significantly misleading. This is because—unless the crux has escaped me altogether—he is not wholeheartedly opposed to hybridity at all. The complaint is rather that prevalent inclusivist designs are not respectful and inclusive enough. Hazan's statements of his overall methodological bearings underline this twist. On the one hand, he rejects the 'postmodern relativist' idea that lived experiences and social statuses are purely discursive constructions. That won't do, he insists, because old and infirm people, those in pain, Holocaust victims, the autistic, inhabit phenomenological realities that at best can only partly be shared with others, and at times cannot be communicated to them at all.

No amount of hocus-porous talk can get around that. Such moments prompt admiring recall of Sebastiano Timpanaro's sombre *On Materialism*, with its unblinking insistence on the 'autonomous, invincible reality' of physical ills. Hazan seems to concur, as when he notes that 'there is a real world out there where things possess *an actual* quiddity', lying 'beyond social constructionism'. Old people, we might extrapolate, are realistically aware that they may be close to dying, may bear their suffering in silence, may not actually care too much if they are taken away, at least before they lapse into insufferable non-recognition, and will in fact die one way or another. But then, incongruously, Hazan adds that he is 'not arguing for the actual existence of non-hybrid essences', in the form of old age, pain or autism. 'My claims are all made within the epistemological realm of social constructivism'. Well, many astute philosophers have sought to reconcile realism and constructionism, in the conviction that, in Hazan's words, 'both answers are true', that they 'constitute a never-ending dialectic'. But that project requires developed synthesis rather than instant juxtaposition of this kind.

Hazan's underlying but understated ambivalence is reflected in his encounters with particular theorists. For example, despite his tirade against postmodern ethics in these days of unprecedented flux, he refers favourably to that harbinger of Liquid Everything, Zygmunt Bauman. Then, when he reports on the reappropriation of hybridity in the hands of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Robert Young, no obviously negative note is sounded. Yet this renders quite implausible the link he suddenly forges at the end of the relevant passage between postcolonial scholarship and 'consumerist celebration in the postmodern perspective'. As for names sometimes more readily associated with the latter, Hazan makes a show of enlisting in his support Foucault on biopower, Latour on no one ever having been in the slightest bit modern, and Agamben on the excruciality of bare life. These somewhat counter-intuitive conceptual clips might stimulate further reflection, but, like the book as a whole, do not sufficiently ground either the arguments or the indignation that Hazan brings to his pursuit of hybridity.

With the balance struck in favour of interactive discourse, Hazan portrays extreme old age and the difficulty of properly assimilating it less as matters of natural decay and inevitable social limitation than as the direct result of the crushing, uncomprehending 'modern, mid-life, neurotypical' gaze. Elderly and Alzheimer subjects are read as intrinsically deficient in the terms of the lifestyle bible of aspirational time-management and the obsession with stemming personal decline. Hazan thinks that precious little credit is given to the infirm old as occupants and negotiators of their independent (and valid) world, a world governed by spatial contiguity in the perpetual present rather than by temporality, haste, action and forward

thinking. On such specificities, Hazan is surely insightful. But this suggests that he wants more, deeper interpretive incorporation of non-hybridity, not less. The thought also occurs—a risk, given his expertise—that he might not be taking enough account of the complexity and variety of aged experience itself. Is it really the case that those ‘mid-life, neurotypical’ hegemony—whom Hazan seems to imagine stereotypically pumping iron in the gym, dying their hair, covering their wrinkles, chatting about menus, movies and pensions, addressing problems of the day as if they would, if only they were consulted, quickly set things right—are simply in denial of their true (ageing) state, or being actively neglectful, in prosecuting their own interests, of nearer-to-death friends and family? And do most of those putatively walled up in the citadel of the (new) ‘Fourth Age’ really feel totally overpowered or definitively pigeonholed by their non-hybridization? Is there not love and frustration, appreciation and disconnect, on all sides and in roughly equal measure? These issues may be more open-ended than he makes out.